

# PIONEER TRAIL

## Mission Statement

The Pioneer Trail is a journey through early Las Vegas, celebrating the lives of many people who helped build this unique city. Each forged a valuable link in the chain of history that binds this community together and connects it to others. Sharing this knowledge encourages us to reflect on how the events of the past have shaped the present, and what legacy we, as members of our own communities, would like to leave for future generations.



This project funded by the  
Southern Nevada Public Lands  
Management Act

## History of the Trail

The Pioneer Trail is the vision of the West Las Vegas community that wanted to celebrate the history of West Las Vegas and the early pioneers that settled the area and contributed to its culture and heritage. A community group was formed to interview long-time residents and research the history of the area. The result was an extensive oral history collection and access to photographic archives that wove a tale of dreams realized and lost, civil rights victories, speakeasies and the development of a strong community, ethnically diverse and culturally rich.



McWilliams townsite 1904

Clark County and the city of Las Vegas joined forces to complete the project and applied for funding from the sale of Bureau of Land Management lands under the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act. The funding provided for local artists and historians to design the layout for banners and markers, and research the text for the markers. The Pioneer Trail Committee was formed and included local residents, artists, historians and business persons, as well as city and county staff.

The Pioneer Trail leads visitors through the area where the development of early Las Vegas truly began. As you travel from site to site, you will gain a sense of the adventurous spirit of those men and women who contributed to the growth and cultural heritage of the valley. And you will leave with an understanding of the extreme difficulties of making a life in this once-barren desert.



Monroe Avenue 1943

## Early Las Vegas History

The history of the area surrounding the Pioneer Trail is intimately intertwined with the beginning of Las Vegas. The Las Vegas Springs Preserve **1** is the site of pre-historic artesian wells that sprang from the earth and supplied the Paiutes and Anasazi Indians with water to irrigate gardens. During the mid-1800s Anglo explorers used the area for a much-needed rest stop along the Spanish Trail, and the Mormons established a fort to the northeast of the Springs as a rest stop for missionaries as they traveled south **15**. Only a few small ranches existed in the area until the early 1900s when a surveyor named J. T. McWilliams developed his dream of a boisterous mining town.

(Continued on inside)

In 1904, Las Vegas was little more than a campsite for miners and ranchers until the railroad was completed along the old wagon route between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles in 1905. McWilliams purchased 80 acres on the west side of the proposed rail line, and began selling lots in the “McWilliams’ Townsite,” **6**, later known as the “Westside.” The first business district in the Las Vegas Valley was established here, including banks, blacksmiths, wholesale houses, restaurants, and a drug and general store. Ironically, the railroad proved to be the kiss of death for McWilliams’ Townsite. The railroad company owned most of the land east of the completed tracks, as well as all of the water rights. The company platted its own townsite, “Clark’s Las Vegas Townsite,” in 1905 and effectively controlled development for decades.

The area was populated with mostly white and hispanic families until the early 1930s when hundreds of families were moving to Las Vegas hoping to find work building the Hoover Dam, including large numbers of black families arriving from the South. Korean immigrant Frank Kim opened a successful produce farm on Bonanza to help the growing community, by growing melons, tomatoes and onions **4**.



Wall murals at the Westside School, now home to KCEP, a non-profit radio station.

Although Blacks were free to live and own businesses on the east side of town, subsequent segregation practices forced most of the minority population to relocate to the Westside. The area quickly became overcrowded, continuing to lack basic amenities such as sewer and paved streets until well into the 1940s. Low-income minorities and whites found refuge here, with the black population having the strongest cultural presence.

The population of Las Vegas increased significantly again during WWII as people came to find work at the military bases and industrial plants in the area. Housing construction could not keep up, especially after WWII when residents returned home or lost their jobs at the local air force base or military industrial plants. In response, the federal government stepped in to help provide housing for veterans and their families. The Biltmore Village is one result of this program **16**.

A community of churches **7**, businesses, and nightclubs was formed using the residents’ own resources and ingenuity, and black-owned businesses began to flourish in the Westside. Hotels and casinos were built, including the former Carver House and Moulin Rouge **5**, and the still standing Town Tavern, located on Jackson Avenue **9**, the historic commercial strip. As black entertainers performing on the Strip were not allowed to stay there, boarding houses such as the Harrison Boarding House **8**, prospered.

When integration became an established policy during the 1960s, blacks began patronizing businesses outside the Westside, with little of the white population reciprocating. Discouraged financial institutions and social organizations could not adequately address the economic barriers confronting this neighborhood, resulting in a slow decline. West Las Vegas has remained virtually unchanged since the 1970s. It is hoped that future development will bring about a positive change.



### **1 Las Vegas Springs Preserve 8000 B.P.**

Created roughly 8,000 years before present, these springs and creek gave life to the center of the valley. The Native American populations used the water for irrigation and

the stop became a lifesaver for travelers en route to remote areas and California during the mid-1800s. Much of the original historic facilities remain intact, and the site is now a cultural center with interpretive and educational exhibits. Portions of the Springs site are listed on the State and National Register of Historic Places.

### **2 Lorenzi Park 1926**

Lorenzi Lake opened as a private resort in 1926 with a clubhouse, swimming pool, horseback riding and picnic tables. It became the Twin Lakes Lodge in the 1940s and served as a dude ranch for hopeful divorcees during the 1950s. The city acquired the park in 1966. As of 2005, some of the old motel buildings still exist in the northwest corner of the park.



### **3 Binion House 1942**

The Binion house is famous for its colorful owner Benny Binion, the original owner of the Binion Horseshoe Club on Fremont Street. The Binion family lived here from 1947 until Benny passed away in 1989. Built in 1942, the house was one of the largest in Las Vegas at the time. It remains a unique home with its rustic “Old West” ranch style incorporating native stone and log construction and sweeping veranda. Today, only a caretaker and some horses use the property (See photo next page).

### **4 Kim Produce Farm 1932**

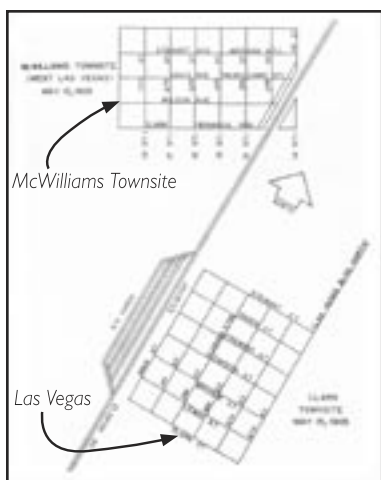
The Kim farm was one of the only produce farms in Las Vegas during the 1930s and 1940s. Korean immigrant Frank Kim was successful at raising melons, tomatoes

and onions in the poor desert soils. Customers could pick up the produce at his home, the last house on Clark Street (now Bonanza), south of the road near present day Martin Luther King Boulevard.



## 5 Moulin Rouge 1955

The first integrated hotel and casino in Las Vegas, the Moulin Rouge opened in May 1955. Entertainers from the Strip and Hollywood flocked to its showroom and casino, where celebrities and patrons, black and white, mingled freely. The hotel closed in October 1955, and much of the original casino was burned in 2003. It is still celebrated as a landmark of racial integration in Las Vegas and the U.S. The site is listed on the local and National Register of Historic Places.



*This is the original townsite laid out by surveyor J. T. McWilliams in 1905 in relationship to "Clark's Las Vegas Township." Few of the original buildings remain from this time; however, the original block pattern with lots running both north-south and east-west can still be seen.*

## 6 McWilliams' Townsite 1905

Created in 1905, the "Original Las Vegas Townsite" was Las Vegas' first business and residential development.

Located along the wagon road between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles, the bustling townsite was home to roughly 1,500 people who worked at nearby mines and other businesses. Development lagged behind that of the east side of town, and today industrial development and a freeway have eliminated all but roughly half of the original townsite. Few of the original buildings from the glory days remain.

## 7 St. James the Apostle Catholic Church 1940

St. James was the second Catholic Church in Las Vegas, opening in 1940 in a small concrete building. Originally mostly Latino, by the mid-1960s the parish had become largely black. The church became a staple of the black community. In the 1990s, St. James moved to its new home on Martin Luther King at Lake Mead Boulevard. It remains a vibrant, lively church that celebrates its black identity and is renowned for its fine gospel choir.

## 8 Harrison Boarding House 1933

Black entertainers were not allowed to stay at the Strip hotels where they performed in the 1940s and 1950s, so Mrs. Harrison's boarding house offered rooms for many of the era's most famous stars. During one week in 1949 the house was graced with Jack Benny's sidekick Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, singer Bob Parrish, the Edwards Sisters, the Jubalaires and musician/singer Arthur Lee Simpkins.



## 9 Jackson Street Commercial District 1942

In the 1940s and 1950s, this commercial district bustled with a grocery store, barbershop, beauty shop, recreation center, restaurant, drug store and gas station, created to serve the segregated black population. Numerous bars and hotels hosted shows and performances that lasted

well into the late night hours. When restrictions that kept blacks out of the Las Vegas casinos were lifted, many of the small businesses closed. The New Town Tavern at Jackson and F streets is the sole survivor of this exciting time.



## 10 Christensen House "The Castle" 1935

Called "the Castle," this fairy-tale residence reflects the unique African American woman Lucretia Tanner Christensen Stevens who built it, and whose roots stretch back to a pioneering Utah Mormon blacksmith, ranchers in Idaho and Nevada, and railroad workers in Las Vegas. The house is unique in Las Vegas with its faux half-timbering, tower and rock facing.

## 11 Moody House 1939

Herman Moody, Las Vegas' first black career policeman, was raised in this house at 321 Van Buren Avenue, built by his parents who came here in 1939. Mr. Moody is credited with helping improve the efficiency and standards of the Las Vegas Police Department by acquiring books on Nevada law and showing others how to use them to improve their record of making good arrests. He is regarded as a role model in the community.



Westside School

## 12 Westside School 1923

From 1904 until 1923, children from McWilliams' Townsite crossed the railroad tracks to get to school in Clark's Townsite. This lasted until the Las Vegas School District built this two-room school. The addition to the west was added in 1949, but was eventually phased out for school use in 1967. It now serves as community radio station KCEP. The building is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

## 13 Las Vegas Paiute Colony 1911

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) bought this ten-acre site in 1911 to provide a home for the Southern Paiute Indians living in and near Las Vegas. Living conditions here were poor until the 1960s, when the federal government stepped in to build homes, pave streets and bring in city water. Today, the colony houses people who work in the city, and the Tribal Council has its offices here.

## 14 Woodlawn Cemetery 1914

Until 1914, when the railroad donated land for a city cemetery, people buried the dead in small family plots or on public land reserved for burials. Woodlawn was created in 1914 when several prominent local women persuaded the railroad to donate ten acres to be dedicated as a city cemetery. Several notable local residents and characters are interred here.

## 15 Las Vegas Mormon Fort 1855-1856

The Old Fort is a remnant of the complex of adobe structures built by Mormon colonists in 1855-1856. It served as a ranch until the land was sold to the railroad in 1902. The story of the Fort reflects the growth of Las Vegas as its economy changed from ranching to railroading to gaming. The Old Fort is now the Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort State Historic Park, and is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

## 16 Biltmore Village 1942

This WWII neighborhood was named for the Nevada Biltmore Hotel which opened nearby in 1942. A WWII housing shortage called for the construction of several hundred homes for military personnel and their families. The federal government approved the Biltmore Village for construction. Typical wartime housing, the homes were small and one story, built in the modest Cottage and Ranch styles. Much of the original neighborhood remains today, boasting curved, tree-lined streets and welcoming front porches.

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Graphics by: Rita Schoonmaker

Researcher/Writer: Liz Warren, Courtney Mooney

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